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Civic education – Portuguese students' perceptions

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Abstract

Civic Education (CE) as a non-disciplinary curriculum area is the focus of this study. Its main purpose is to understand how schools are facing CE and propose ways to overcome difficulties in the teaching and learning process of this subject. So as to characterize how CE is being handled, an exploratory study was conducted. Given the importance of students in this process, their points of view were obtained through a questionnaire. Respondents were 266 students attending low secondary education at a public basic school in Aveiro (Portugal) whose ages ranged between 12 and 16. Students' perceptions were analysed through descriptive statistics and organized in three different dimensions: conceptions, relevance and class management. An excessive attention to school life matters over other important activities for effective implementation of CE goals is evident.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, Citizenship has been a topic of fruitful discussions, studies and projects in Europe (Brooks & Holford, 2009; Osler & Starkey, 2006; Torney-Purta, Schwille, & Amadeo, 1999), which have resulted in important guidelines for their member states (Audigier, 2000; Belanger, 2001; Council of Europe, 2002; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001). Although different countries have developed multiple approaches for the promotion of Citizenship Education (Eurydice, 2005), there have been efforts to promote a common skills benchmark within citizenship.

In Portugal, the implementation of Citizenship Education has a long history of advances and setbacks. The evolution of the concept and its practical applications are directly connected with the social and political context of the country. An historical overview allows us to understand that citizenship has been recognized over time in Portugal. Santos (2005) states that the school reforms carried out during the Constitutional Monarchy show that the curriculum paradigm, sustained mainly by the Church, has gradually incorporated built and consolidated the main principles of Citizenship Education. In 1910, the establishment of the First Republic constituted an important period for Citizenship Education, once it took a nuclear role in the Republicans' political project. Built on democratic values, the Republican ideology withdrew vocations from the school curricula, but continued to enhance moral education independently of any religion and based on the values of individuals (Henriques, 2008).

Some years later (1926), the immersion of the country in a fascist regime turned the national curriculum into one of the main vehicles of state ideology indoctrination, where obedience and order prevailed, and prohibited all reflective and critical thinking (Campos & Menezes, 1996). Again, a strengthening of the religious component for

the promotion of citizenship was introduced, which remained almost unchanged until the end of the regime (1974). After 50 years of dictatorship, a military revolution peacefully restored democracy in Portugal. However, the following years, marked by political instability and weak governments, led to successive reforms in education, where many changes took place, learning and teaching experiences were carried out, but results and evaluation of their impact were never really addressed.

In 2001, a consensus around Citizenship Education was achieved and within the curriculum reorganization of basic education (Government Act No. 6, 18th January 2001) and among other changes, a non-disciplinary curricular area named Civic Education was created, defined as a privileged space for the development and exercising of citizenship. Since then, Citizenship Education has been expected to be provided from a trans-disciplinary point of view (a component running across all subjects of the curriculum, methodologies and attitudes), but also confined to a specific class time of the curriculum and taught by the class director. Similar situations also occur in other countries: “in secondary education (or at certain stages of it), nearly half of all European countries have established a separate subject for teaching pupils citizenship” (Eurydice 2005, p. 59).

Despite the compulsory nature of this non-disciplinary curricular area, the Portuguese National Curriculum allows schools and teachers flexibility to develop their own curriculum content and innovative approaches to citizenship education. Schools and teachers are therefore primarily responsible for its implementation and enforcement on the ground, and it is up to them to outline the projects and activities in order to construct meaningful learning and foster the development of citizenship skills in students.

Some years later national studies that evaluated the impact of this policy showed that this compulsory subject is confronted with several difficulties. Despite the broad consensus around this area, some authors (Almeida, 2006; Araújo, 2008; Bettencourt & Pinto, 2007; Figueiredo, 2005; Fonseca, 2009; Henriques, 2008; Santos, 2005) indicate some of its limitations. In general, CE has primarily served the resolution of administrative issues (justification of students' absences; dissemination of school information; academic success) and management of conflicts (disciplinary problems; student conflicts; etc.) and, to a lesser extent, the development of projects within the framework of citizenship. Bettencourt (2007, p.14) states that CE “is considered an essential area in managing the class, although it is noted that the programmatic content of this area associated with the promotion of citizenship is relegated to the background or even totally marginalized”.

The results of these studies allow us to understand that the objectives underlying the implementation of this non-disciplinary curricular area are far from being fully implemented, largely due to the lack of teacher training in this domain, but also because of the absence of methodological explanations and/or the lack of a clear definition of the objectives of this subject. Citizenship skills, abilities and attitudes are required of teachers, but they are rarely provided the necessary training for them to perform this role (Figueiredo & Silva, 2000). Despite teacher-training being seen as the right path to improve CE learning opportunities (Torney-Purta & Lopez, 2006), this area has generally been clearly neglected.

Educating for Citizenship implies an intentional and systematic educational effort, across the whole school and involving it as a community, with the ultimate goal of promoting a global enrichment of students as people and preparing them for active participation in society (Fonseca, 2003). This brief contextualization of Citizenship Education in the Portuguese educational system allows us to understand that it is imperative to change its status quo.

2. Research Design

Civic Education as a non-disciplinary curriculum area is the focus of this study that seeks to develop mechanisms to support the teaching and learning process in this domain. Our main purposes are to design and develop a teacher-training program taking into account research findings such as those previously described and the specific traits of the school community chosen for this study. Given the interest in producing effective changes in CE classes and encouraging the development of projects within the framework of citizenship, this study is action-research based. Action-research is a flexible research methodology suitable for successfully transfer research knowledge into changes in practices (Somekh, 2008).

To achieve the goals outlined above we started by conducting an exploratory study in one public basic school which involved questionnaires to students, interviews to teachers, document analysis and classroom observation protocols. According to the European framework teacher-training programmes must be connected to their practices.

Therefore, in order to develop a relevant programme in this domain, first it is crucial to understand current teaching practices, main problems and potentialities from a holistic perspective.

An exploratory study is normally conducted when researchers possess “little or no scientific knowledge about the group, process, activity or situation they want to examine but nevertheless have reason to believe contains elements worth discovering” (Alan-Stebbins, 2008, p.1). This exploratory study allowed us to diagnose some of the current practices and main problems in that specific school and gave us a picture of major potentialities of this compulsory subject.

In this study we resorted mainly to qualitative techniques of data collection (interviews to teachers; class observation; school documents analysis). However, to collect students’ data about CE we chose to develop and apply a questionnaire. Students are key actors in the educational process and their perceptions allow us to make important inferences about the teaching and learning process. Inquiry by questionnaire fits our purpose of generating a general understanding of the domain of CE. Since it was applied in class time we were able to collect a large number of responses in a short period of time. This exploratory instrument was designed to gain insights into students’ opinions, aiming to find their perceptions regarding CE. In order to guarantee internal consistency of the data collection instrument the questionnaire was validated by three specialists and subjected to a pilot study (n=14). After the pilot application and resulting corrections it was applied to all students of the school where the study took place.

Respondents were 266 students attending low secondary education (7th, 8th and 9th grades) at a public basic school in the region of Aveiro (Portugal), who’s ages ranged between 12 and 16. The average age of students in the study was 13 and 52% of respondents were girls. Even though the questionnaire contains several groups of questions we will only present results from the first one. This group of questions was composed of 17 statements under a four point *Likert* scale, ranging from “*totally disagree*” to “*totally agree*”. The main objectives of these statements were:

1. to analyse students conceptions about CE;
2. to identify the relevance that students ascribe to CE classes;
3. to understand class management from the students’ point of view.

Results and considerations will be presented next. Data collected was analysed using descriptive statistics models and will be presented separately in three dimensions of CE – conceptions, relevance and class management – linked to the objectives listed above.

3. Results

3.1. Conceptions

The analysis of the issues associated with conceptions about CE allows us to see that there is a strong framing of values education. From the students’ point of view, the teachers expect them to learn values such as solidarity, respect, equality, tolerance and responsibility (52% totally Agree). CE classes are also perceived as a space where the teacher advises students as to how they should behave, relate and interact in society (47% Agree and 49,6% Totally Agree). According to Figueiredo (2005), this conception of values education is clearly associated with moral education, e.g. CE classes are seen as “a place for transmitting values” where the teacher is concerned with the existence of “good people” and his/her duty is to help students acquire the values commonly accepted by society in order to facilitate their interpersonal relationships and social integration. Furthermore, the perception of the CE class as a discussion space of topical issues or general culture, despite evidencing a high agreement, is more confined to Agree (55.7%). The highest value on “Totally Agree” is 56%, and refers to an item that states that CE is an important place for class conflict resolution. We believe that this idea of conflict resolution can be seen both at the level of peers, teachers and the school. In this context it is easy to understand why improvement of students’ behaviour is considered the main objective of CE classes for the majority of respondents (51,1% Agree and 25,9% Totally Agree).

3.2. Relevance

In an attempt to identify the relevance that CE has for students, several statements were presented structured on the comparison of this non-disciplinary curricular area with other disciplinary subjects, based on the assumption that this is not a compulsory subject and calling for inputs from their latest experiences in CE. Data analysis reveals that students disagree with the idea that CE is a minor discipline due to its evaluation not interfering with final approval in the school year (39.9 % Totally Disagree and 34.9% Disagree). Nevertheless, they reveal a positive attitude towards the subject linked with the fact that they are not submitted to exams in CE (38% Totally Agree and 31% Agree). Moreover, acceptance of this non-curricular area by students is evident when we look at responses that indicate students show pleasure in attending CE classes, even if not compulsory (44.4% Agree and 35.7% Totally Agree). Collected data also reveals that students would like to deepen more topics in CE, if they had another hour of class per week (41.4% Agree and 35.3% Totally Agree). Relevance given to CE classes can also be perceived through their perception of this subject as an open environment that gives opportunities to students to talk about issues of their interest (58.1% Agree and 28 % Totally Agree).

3.3. Class management

The dimension associated with the management and conduction of CE classes depicts results that show that CE bears a strong informal nature. Such characteristic can be perceived through the responses of students, for whom CE is seen as a subject where students feel more relaxed (40.2% Totally Agree and 33.8% Agree). Accordingly, when questioned if the classes are boring and uninteresting, the majority of students show their disagreement – only 21% share a negative view of CE (13.3% Agree; Totally Agree 7.6%). Nevertheless, CE classes are perceived and accepted by students as a space for analysis and discussion of the students' behaviour in other disciplines (45.7% Agree and 33.2% Totally Agree). There is clear evidence that teachers/class directors use CE classes to resolve administrative issues, namely to justify students' absences and to report pertinent matters of school functioning and policies (45.3% Agree and 20% Totally Agree).

4. Discussion

After presenting some key results of the first phase of this study, it is important to relate them to previous studies and reflect on their impact in future work within this ongoing study. The data presented above allows us to verify that, in general, students have a very positive opinion of CE, as their opinions are generally consistent with the positive statements obtained from the questionnaire. We can see that CE is clearly associated with a strand of Moral Education, as Figueiredo mentions (2005), which states that what happened in the Portuguese educational system with the implementation of CE was a removal of the religious component of the course of Morals and Religious Education, maintaining the same principles of transmission and inculcation of values. Furthermore, the largest number of responses from students refers to CE as an ideal space for conflict resolution and class issues. If we consider that these conflicts involved issues associated with peer conflicts, student behavior in other disciplines and in the general school context, we can associate this conception of CE with the fact that 80% of the students agree that the way teachers use most of the time of CE classes is for the resolution of behavioral issues. There is also evidence of an excessive centralization of CE spaces and times on school life matters over other important activities for effective implementation of citizenship education goals.

As Bettencourt and Pinto (2007, p. 80) state, "CE is considered a very useful area because its contribution is recognized as effective for the regulation of the problems of authority, discipline and in some cases, of learning". Nevertheless, the development of this compulsory subject does not generally follow a strategy of citizenship education in its various aspects, and is very conditioned by class management demands. However, despite previous studies having demonstrated that these classes are generally a space for "sermons" and "calls for attention" (Figueiredo, 2005) it appears that the students enjoy CE classes, which they would continue to attend even if this subject were no longer compulsory. We believe that this statement is largely related with the informal nature of CE and with the fact that students find it a suitable environment for the discussion of various issues not imposed by a curriculum.

5. Final Considerations

There is a tendency to widen the scope of the concept of Citizenship Education as new problems arise in society, with new requirements and responsibilities for the school (Bettencourt & Pinto, 2007). But are schools – and especially the teachers – prepared for these challenges? Almost a decade has passed after the implementation of this non-disciplinary curricular area of CE in the Portuguese curriculum of basic education; we find that this issue remains a challenge for research and for educational communities. Data collected allow us to understand that the students' points of view about CE in the school where this study took place are in line with other national research conclusions (Figueiredo, 2005; Bettencourt & Pinto, 2007; Henriques, 2008; Santos, 2005). We stress that the questionnaire sought to highlight what the CE classes represent to these students nowadays, not what they expected them to be. We hope to be able to collect such data, as we are, at present, conducting focus group sessions for such purpose. The responsibility of the class teacher to ensure the necessary conditions for the academic success of the class implies that CE classes are often totally used for solving daily occurrences, mostly of behavioral nature. Students are aware of this use of CE spaces and times; nevertheless, they enjoy those classes because they perceive them as informal spaces for discussing issues of their own interest and personal problems. It is therefore important to train teachers in this domain, towards the development of projects related to the various fields of Citizenship Education that concomitantly contribute towards the personal and social development of students.

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